

Language and Power: The Saudi Tertiary English Language Classroom

By

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Hanan Alotaibi, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of doctor of philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Abstract

Many studies confirm the positive role of the student's first language (L1) in the English language (EL) classroom. However, the English Language at the Future University (a pseudonym) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) adopts an English-only approach in tertiary EL classrooms and this approach has proved to be problematic for teachers and students alike. This research, using a qualitative approach, investigates the role of L1 in EL teaching in a tertiary EL institution. Data were collected from teacher interviews, focus groups with students, and classroom observations. The purpose of the study was to contribute to research in the field of L1 use in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts by: exposing the language ideologies underpinning the informal but effective ban on L1 in L2 classrooms; exploring the roles of L1 in the English classroom; and examining the relation between language choice and power practices in the English classroom.

Analysis of the data showed that the Arabic language existed in the EFL classrooms as a visible or invisible resource and played a variety of cognitive, pedagogic, and affective roles. The participants' perceptions towards the use of Arabic in Saudi EFL classrooms indicated that certain language ideologies included or excluded Arabic. The findings also revealed the exercise of power in the verbal and nonverbal practices of both teachers and students in these classrooms. Teachers disciplined students either through surveillance (Foucault 1977) or through their choice of language. Power is exercised differently in different contexts; in the Saudi classroom, the teacher's role is shaped by particular cultural understandings of knowledge and authority. This study argues that the English-only approach enhances the teacher's powerful status and marginalises students.

Since "there are no relations of power without resistance" (Foucault 1980, p. 142), participating students responded to the power exercised by teachers through language choice and by resisting certain practices and classroom regimes. It was also found that the judicious utilisation of the Arabic language contributed to a more equal distribution of power in the Saudi English classroom. The students used Arabic to negotiate power with their teachers and, when they were not allowed to use Arabic, they were less engaged in and more resistant to the learning of English. Therefore, this research argues that the inclusion of the Arabic language in the Saudi EL classroom allows students to negotiate power with the teacher.